

13

The Relation of the Sexes: Rousseauan Reflections on the Crisis of Our Times*

ALLAN BLOOM

I

Since man according to Rousseau is just another animal, by his natural end seeking only his preservation and procreation of his species, while what we think of as his humanity—his reason, his art, his morality and his love—is only the product of a series of accidents, and hence outside the ordered system of mechanical causation which constitutes nature, Rousseau's task in discerning and forming the distinctively human is of an entirely different kind and magnitude from the one he faced when he was only trying to protect Emile's natural growth. No immanent principle informs the development of man's higher faculties or orders his fortuitous acquisitions with respect to one another or to an end which would give them significance. They conflict with one another and man's natural end. To bring these diverse elements into harmony is a work of art rather than of nature; the pattern to be followed is envisioned not by scientific observation but by imagination. As science, rehabilitated from the critique of the *Discourse on the Arts and Sciences*, was the instrument of knowing and satisfying nature in the earlier parts of the *Emile*, art is rehabilitated for the purpose of reconciling the opposition

* This article is based on Rousseau, *Emile*, Books VI and V, and Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, Vol. II, Part iii, Chaps. 8-12.

between nature and civilization which, according to the *Discourse on the Origins of Inequality*, defines developed man, or rather shows why he cannot be defined. Education, somewhere between what the Greeks meant by *paideia* and what the Germans meant by *Bildung*, becomes for Rousseau the key to man's becoming human, and this accounts for the absolutely central position of the *Emile* among his works. Education forms, paints, gives definition to man; but the educator has no divine pattern to which he can look (cf. Plato, *Republic* 500b-501c, 591d-592b). The only guidance he has in his moulding of a unified being is provided by the contrary demands of man's natural selfishness and his acquired sociality. The educator is not imitator but creator, and it is imagination which divines the pattern he must follow. Imagination, banished not only in the earlier parts of the *Emile* but from modern philosophy since Machiavelli accused ancient philosophy of building only on imaginations of things, is triumphantly restored and its role magnified far beyond what it had been before. Kant invented the term *culture*, in its modern sense, to describe the intended result of Rousseau's system of education.¹ We can here rediscover the serious meaning of this now debased word, its noble intention and the problematic character of the opposition between civilization and culture which it substitutes for the classic opposition between nature and convention.

The instrument for the movement from natural to truly social man, the motor for the development of man's higher powers is, according to Rousseau, sex. The truly novel aspect of the *Emile* is its concentration on sex, and three-fifths of it, Books IV and V, constitute the first philosophic treatise on sexual education. To it can be traced the explanation of man's spirituality by his sexuality with which we are so familiar—an explanation which is rivaled in its persuasiveness to us only by the economic explanation. Rousseau also had something to do with the latter, but he himself found its source in earlier modern thinkers. It would not be misleading to assert that, for Rousseau, the extension of the economic motive for sociality is the source of man's misery while the extension of the sexual motive is the basis for his possible salvation. The first part of the book is devoted to making *Emile* economically self-sufficient, to limiting the economic motive; the second part to making him sexually dependent, to extending the sexual motive, to opposing the romantic to the bourgeois. Rousseau, while agreeing with almost all the modern philosophers that what is understood to be higher in man is derivative from the lower, argues that all the desire and passions arising out of the quest for preservation and fear of death make men more dependent and at the same time less fit to live together. All the social sentiments derived from such needs reduce immediately back to the selfishness from which they stemmed;

all the enlightenment acquired is used only for the sake of these needs. And, what is more, none of this contributes to the original goal of preservation; all to the contrary, civilization thus motivated is detrimental to happiness, freedom and preservation. The sentiments that can be linked to sexual desire, however, are capable of an independent existence, one that does not collapse back into its source. Simply, a business relationship cannot be converted into genuine concern for the partner as an end in himself; a sexual one can. Rousseau finds in the sexual drive a natural basis for a non-mercenary sociality and for elevated goals. Natural man wanted to preserve himself and wanted a woman. Hobbes and Locke paid almost no attention to the latter, for the good reason that the former is more powerful. Rousseau, after having paid due attention to preservation, makes much out of sex. And in this respect he is the absolute beginning of a very powerful current of thought. No philosopher has paid so much attention to sex; only Plato's treatment of *eros* is comparable, and it is Rousseau's model.

Rousseau speaks of puberty as a second birth. With it a whole new dimension of reality is discovered, the one which poets describe and the existence of which is denied by the principle of utility. This dimension has been scrupulously hidden from Emile in the prosaic material world in which he has lived until now. The task that Rousseau sets for himself is to establish a teleology of sex. There is no doubt that as he, and all men using their common sense, look at nature there are natural ends. The human organism manifests purposes; clear vision, sharp hearing, strong and agile limbs are some of its intentions. And these conduce to the end of preservation which all living things share. Similarly sexual differentiation, sexual organs and sexual desires evidently serve the purpose of procreation. More doubtful, and certainly not evident to the senses, is the existence of inclinations toward social and moral ends. The desire to preserve oneself does not point toward dying for the common good, although in a secondary way it can lead to an appreciation of society. Similarly, sexual desire does not point to fidelity to a mate; all to the contrary, the desire itself leads to infidelity. Sexual desire is purposive because it causes the production of babies. Nothing in it seems concerned with civilizing them. Rousseau's education of Emile, therefore, has as its end to make sexual desire point not only to bodily satisfaction but to love of his partner, fidelity to her, care for his children. Rousseau undertakes to form an *eros* for the good and the beautiful, to implant it in the very desire so that the longing for sexual intercourse exists only when it is aroused by such objects. In this way desire will not tell Emile one thing and law or duty another; his most intimate pleasure will be identical with the fulfillment of his highest obligations. There is no need to employ conventions

and force to coerce the abandonment of inclination, conventions and force which divide man, in Rousseau's view, on the basis of opinion—mere opinion, for they have no foundation in nature.

This solution to the problem of the ends of life comes to light as a corrective to, not a substitute for, the views of nature espoused by Hobbes and Locke. Rousseau too looks for orientation by the beginnings, not the ends, by the powerful passions, not the virtues. But the preservation of life is merely a means to life; and, if taken as the end (for the very good reasons that all men agree that preservation must be sought and that therefore it is an extremely effective motive), it makes life senseless. Man has to spend his life seeking to preserve it for the sake of living it. This works so long as men are under the influence of fear which induces self-forgetting. But, if ever they feel secure, they look for things to do, for a meaning to life; but such a meaning escapes them, for the objectivity of ends has been undermined by the thought embodied in modern societies. Ancient societies were happier because, according to Rousseau, they believed in illusions like the common good which gave men a purpose satisfying to the soul of men at leisure. Locke's own corrective of Hobbes' need for continual terror intensifies rather than solves the problem. His addition of "comfortable" to self-preservation provides an end beyond that dictated by fear, one that can involve the desires of men who feel reasonably secure, who are not overwhelmed by the thought of their vulnerability. But this leads to a life of continuous work and calculation, acquisition without any sense of the use for which things are acquired other than comfort. Such desire takes men even further from the idleness and enjoyment of the sentiment of existence loved by natural man; it is infinite and pointless. When men stop and say, "This is enough, now we can enjoy leisure," they are too far from nature, their faculties are too developed and restless for them to be idle all day. Then they can devote themselves to politics, art and science unfettered by mere necessity, by the division of labor whose only purpose was to free them in this way. But in a world informed by such principles, politics exists only to preserve men, science only to make them powerful, and art only to entertain them. These are no longer self-sufficient ends and derive their character from what they serve. Divorced from that end they are merely hobbies. In the *bourgeois* world politics does not reflect the noble, art the sublime, or science truth for its own sake. These qualifications are only subjective, and the various pursuits to which they traditionally relate must all be reduced to the common measure of utility. The motivating principle determines all activities; if man is essentially a self-preserving animal, all that he produces must be understood in terms of that fact. Men not in the grips of fear or

avidly pursuing money find themselves overwhelmed by a sense of purposelessness. The prevailing sentiment is either anxiety or boredom.

But sexual desire, although it too is just another selfish bodily desire, differs in fundamental respects from the self-preserved desire. The activity of satisfying the desire is pleasant in itself and can at least appear to be carried out for its own sake. It necessarily involves others; and although it can lead to the most vicious exploitation of them, it is not, like eating, essentially solitary or selfish. True reciprocity is imaginable. Further, no matter what the intention of those possessed of the desire, it is connected with the preservation of the species and elevates, willy-nilly, beyond concern for the individual. Sexual pleasure is the only bodily affect which can be thought to point towards sociality, certainly to the agreeableness of it. And, finally, it unlike fear, admits of being transformed into something else. Sexual desire can become love, and the products of love—children and poems—have an independent existence no longer tainted by their source. Sexual desire can, as Rousseau will show, make a go at accommodating the phenomena of civilized life as the desire for self-preservation cannot. Non-anxious, non-bored men, suffused with erotic intensity, can be humane, tasteful lovers, fathers and citizens without calculation of how all this relates to preservation. And the entire structure rests on sound, natural desires of the body.

Rousseau founds social man on the twin roots of desire for preservation and sex. Artfully intertwined they will grow together into a single trunk which can bear sweet fruit. The sap that runs up that trunk and into the several branches is sexual energy. Rousseau believed that he had discovered a physical source of immense spiritual power which, when added to the flat soul of the young Emile and of early modern philosophy, restored to it the demonic striving, that longing towards ends beyond itself, which characterized the ancient soul. Or, to put it otherwise, modern philosophy had broken down the soul into two elements, ego or consciousness and desire. Rousseau tries to knit them together again and rediscovers man by means of *eros*. Thus he finds the force of the Platonic soul, but not its order. In itself it is inchoate energy; education must order it and provide a hierarchy of its ends. To Rousseau's description of the morally beautiful, Kant gave the name the *sublime*, and from this source flowed the notion that true culture is sublimation. Rousseau's discussion of the relation of men and women must be understood against the background of this delicate process of sublimation and his insistence that the alternative to it is not liberation but the loss of humanity.

II

The aspect of Rousseau's sexual teaching which concerns the family was admirably formulated within the context of real democratic practice by Tocqueville. His chapters on women, marriage, and the family in *Democracy in America*² are a gloss on the theoretical discussion of these matters in *Emile*. In them one finds a statement of the problem of the relation between the sexes, a sanguine analysis of the democratic resolution of that problem, and material for pondering the significance of what has happened since Tocqueville made that analysis. However somber Tocqueville's view of the future of higher things in a world dominated by enlightened self-interest may have been, he was persuaded that democratic society could not only preserve but also heighten the family.

Tocqueville states his principle in epitomizing that of Rousseau: "There have never been free societies without good morals, and . . . the cause of good morals is woman. Everything which has an influence on the condition of women, on their habits and their opinions, has therefore great political influence in my eyes." And he concludes his discussion with the unhesitating assertion that the principal cause of America's singular prosperity and growing strength is the superiority of its women. Sexual politics, always important, is of decisive importance in modern democracy, for the family is the only unit beyond the selfish individual to which men can, in the absence of aristocratic authority and habit, be powerfully attached. The community is a collection of families and derives its moral force from its role as the protector of the family. Without the family the state could only be conceived as the power which defends men in their quest for preservation. There would be no basis for the concern for the past and the future, for the sacrifice for others, which cause men to subordinate calculation of personal interest to something or someone else. Free government requires the use of men's best efforts on the behalf of the community and a certain spirit of self-abnegation; and the only possible link between their newly liberated energies and the community is the family. Without that link a life of self-absorption is naturally inevitable. There is simply nothing else in an age of reason.

Hence Tocqueville's concentration on the family. By good morals he means sexual self-control, or, at least, he means that morals in the more general sense are dependent on the proper erotic disposition. Rousseau develops this point in the greatest detail. Caring for the family stems from natural sexual attraction, and promiscuity makes it difficult to maintain passionate relations with a single person and thus undermines fidelity. If

fidelity is to be maintained without authority or fear of hell-fire, it must be supported by nature's sweetest pleasures. The most intimate and powerful experience of moral attachment, proof against temptations of self-interest, is in the love relation. Self-indulgence as well as self-mastery are learned in this school. Austerity is the ground of citizen virtue, and luxuriousness and addiction to sensual satisfaction are the results of loveless sex. And so is an incapacity for idealism.

The assertion that woman is the cause of the goodness or badness of morals is also a Rousseauan theme. Look at the women in a society, he says, and you will understand the men. Women, by the use of their charms, civilize men. The attraction women exercise draws men into a network of relations which determines their tastes and their way of life. Simply put, woman's chasteness or lack of it is the cause of everything. What a man must do in order to get sexual satisfaction is central to his conduct and his opinions. Whether he is a seducer or a lover depends upon whether he believes that a woman's favor is a reward for his sensual appeal or his virtue, on his belief that her desire is essentially of the body, no matter what artifices she may use to hide that fact, or is informed by ideas of merit. The coarse sensualist, the ardent lover, the *habitué* of the salon, the sensible husband become what they are with respect to the degree and the quality of a woman's chasteness. And men's respect for others and for themselves is in large measure fixed by their sentiments in this primary relationship; hypocrisy or sincerity emerge out of men's and women's attitude toward the pledge of mutuality and exclusivity implicit in civilized sexual union. The core of the relationship between men and women is their natural sexual need of one another and the natural differentiation of function in the satisfaction of that need. Everything between them is, or should be, influenced by these facts. Rousseau and Tocqueville knew it was possible in various ways to elude nature and thus reduce the sexual relatedness of men and women, but in so doing human relatedness altogether is vitally reduced in the name of nothing. Whatever doctrinaires might say, there is still natural necessity: in the absence of erotic motives only economic ones remain, at least in the very great majority of cases, the majority which determines the character of a society. Liberation from sexual interdependence would merely have the effect of making everyone pursue the questionable ends to which love and children are immediately preferable. Rousseau and Tocqueville took it that there are almost no careers more noble than those of husband or wife and parent. For these latter careers to be successfully pursued, the delicate but powerful opposition-in-relation between male and female must be present in every word and deed. The chasteness which makes sex the accompaniment of

respect and fulfilled duty is the special responsibility of women, for, among other reasons, the babies are theirs, and they need fathers for them. Properly used, chasteness can make women the rulers of men and provide a substantial, as opposed to a merely abstract, basis for equality between the sexes. Such an equality is founded on the partners having a common purpose or good, different and essential contributions to make to it and powerful weapons to insure harmony. If either partner has the wherewithal to live satisfactorily without the other or has competing goals outside their union, then it is bound to fail in its mission of substituting real community for instrumental partnership, abandon for calculation.

III

This teleology of man and women, always open to question because of the human capacity to imagine and wish for a condition other than the one indicated by nature, is particularly threatened in modernity. The new idea of mastery of nature, originally understood as overcoming forces hostile to man, such as disease and scarcity, inevitably was extended to human nature itself. The apparent teleology of human things no longer seemed much more persuasive than the teleology of falling bodies. Human nature, no longer a source of ends, began to be seen as merely a raw material which can be shaped according to projects generated by liberated consciousness. This view has its practical realization in the economy of the *bourgeois* world. The goal of increased production of the necessary, useful and pleasant things requires a division of labor which has no reference to the nature of those who work. Men make themselves into what is required for increasing productivity. The division of labor grounded in natural differences of men, *e.g.* ruler and ruled, male and female, father and child, is superseded by a division of purely technical origin. For the economy, the relevant differences are between spinners and weavers, miners and smiths, not male and female. Men and women become more and more interchangeable; and so soon as the increase of well-being becomes society's primary goal, the principle of the family is undermined. At the very least a competition is established between woman as worker and woman as wife and mother. In the former role sex is more than irrelevant; it is an impediment, to be handled by desexualization or a meaningless looseness or both at the same time. In the latter role sex is, so to speak, everything. A problem of identity is established, one that is not

resolved by all the efforts of the new science in the invention of means to make the bearing of children irrelevant or trivial, or by the empty ideology of becoming what one wants to be when the conditions of meaningful choice have disappeared. This denaturing of man and the progressive loss of meaning in life which follows from the new political science and the new political practice is the center of Rousseau's radical critique of modernity, and that critique is the source of Tocqueville's passionate defense of the family as the cornerstone of democratic liberty.

Moreover, the tendency embodied in the economic order is much encouraged by the principle of equality which is part of the new political science. It is difficult to resist the interpretation that equality means sameness. The original movement toward equality was directed against conventional inequalities, those founded on birth and class. It was intended to restore the authority of nature. And in the original teachings natural inequality of talent played a large role, although talent was subordinated to the equality of political right. But the succeeding centuries have witnessed a persistent and ever more successful attempt to deny either the existence of such natural inequalities or their moral or political significance, for nature remained as hard a taskmaster as convention. Egalitarianism became part of the revolt against nature, for equality came to mean the right to and the fact of having all the things held to be good which any other man has. This movement could hardly help having an effect on the condition of women. If every man has a right to vote, if consent is the only basis of legitimate authority, either women must be considered as something other than human or they must be given the right to vote. The instinctual union of men and women must be subordinated to freedom of choice, and the family becomes like the state, an association of consenting and similar adults (not to speak of children) which can be dissolved at will. What we see today is simply the flowering of what was in the seeds of the original egalitarian project.

This result, which from the point of view of equality can only be applauded, is an object of outrage for Tocqueville, speaking from the standpoint of nature. "One can easily conceive that, by making an effort thus to level the two sexes, both are degraded and that from this crude mixture of nature's works only weak men and indecent women could emerge."³ But Tocqueville was also an egalitarian, and he argued, again following Rousseau, that there could be an equality in difference. Women could be respected morally and intellectually as much as men without their having to dispute with men for political predominance. Their wills could consent to men's wills which consent to the political order for the whole family, thus avoiding a conflict of wills in the family. Women could influence the wills of

men. Without the old patterns of hierarchy and domination, rational acceptance of nature's dispositions is possible. As evidence for this faith, Tocqueville had the American experience. Women, left freer than ever before, themselves saw the advantages of marriage and how suitable the division of labor within it is to their nature. The complementarity of the two sexes was clear to them on the basis of sober observation and control of immediate sensual desire. Nature actually proved a surer guarantee of marital fidelity than old customs, authorities and fears.

IV

Tocqueville's hopefulness is founded on a belief like that of Rousseau in the beneficence of nature, although he seems surer of the naturalness of the family. Nature is here understood as the first movements of the heart unaffected by conventions, which are the source of corruption. Tocqueville describes how much sweeter and affecting are the relations between father and son in a democracy than in an aristocracy where the family represents interests of social class and is meant to carry on traditions. Fathers in aristocracies pass on titles, have an authority lent by civil society, the reverence for antiquity and religion. The family is bound up with the transmission of property and station, and the father is the sole ruler of all its members until his death. His authority is derived from prescription, not nature. In a democracy the only rightful authority of the father is that conferred evidently by nature during the child's nonage. When the child is capable of taking care of himself, he is free to do so. Fathers have not titles to transmit, family lands are not enduring, and each man is supposed to make his own living without depending on inheritance. A man's natural love of freedom is not trammled by the democratic family; and when he senses himself free, he can express a free man's gratitude for benefits conferred without gratitude's being stifled by the commandment to be grateful. His father's care was for him, not for an institution, and he can turn to his father's greater experience for counsel in his free choice concerning his own well-being. The artificiality of the aristocratic family is replaced by the natural affectionateness of the democratic family whose members are tied together by evident self-interest, free commitment and the simple pleasures of being together. Inequality given by convention poisons the relations between husband and wife, father and child, brother and brother. Envy, resentment

and rebelliousness in the family relations bear witness to Rousseau's teaching that inequality is the cause of vice.

Just as freedom and equality guarantee and enhance the relation of father and son, so husband and wife are more surely and closely knit in a democracy than in an aristocracy. For Tocqueville, the great thing about American marriage was the fact that wives can choose their own husbands on the basis of their taste and their sense of what is suitable to them, whereas in aristocracies fathers choose husbands for their daughters with a view to a proper matching of stations and fortunes. Love, natural suitability and inclination play at best a secondary role in their determinations. A woman who has chosen for herself is aware of the responsibility and accepts it. If there be a mistake, she knows it was her fault and can blame only herself. It is not the untameableness of desire, as the ancients thought, but inequality which is the source of our ills. In a characteristic remark, Tocqueville says that novels will have little appeal in America. Novels are about forbidden loves, particularly adulterous ones. The novelist, in order to give moral justification to an adulteress, must show that the conflict between love and duty is due to circumstances beyond the control of the woman. She must have been forced into an improper marriage by her parents who put their faith in station and wealth. Inequality of conditions silenced the voice of nature. Nature must be outraged to give moral, and hence aesthetic, justification to the complaints of frustrated desire. But in America as Tocqueville knew it desire was given its due, and its complaints were merely self-indulgence for which American women had no sympathy. There reason and desire coincided, and therefore American women were proof against the longings engendered and nourished by artists.

In addition to a woman's free choice, Tocqueville counted on the laborious character of egalitarian life to dampen promiscuity and guarantee the marital bond. There is little idleness and luxury, which are the conditions of unnecessary desires and splendid vices. Everyone has to work for a living, and imagination is kept close to the ground. Americans are simply too busy and their activities too mundane to permit them to become addicted to amorous pastimes.

Now, Tocqueville surely saw the threat to marriage in modern life, but contemporary America disappoints his expectations about the democratic response to that threat. What he saw in America may have been the fortuitous coincidence of traditional, and hence groundless, restraints and democratic liberties. In the later development, the free choice of one marriage has not prevented the demand for the free choice of further marriages. The reason of women has not been persuaded that dedication to

the family is their natural lot or that chastity is a compelling maxim of prudence. Perhaps American love novels have not been morally persuasive, but the dulling of moral sensibility has not seemed too great a price to pay for erotic arousal. And, although imagination has not soared here, an eroticism which stays close to the ground has been invented to present it with suitable objects. It is even possible that Rousseau's and Tocqueville's encouragement of the free and romantic element in marriage, their insistence on the goodness of inclination as such, may have contributed to the current result. However that may be, they are indispensable aids in making us aware of the character and extent of our problem.

NOTES

1. *Conjectural Beginning of Human History*, in *On History*, ed. Beck (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1963), pp. 60-61,
2. *Op. cit.*, chap. 9, beginning.
3. *Op. cit.*, chap. 12, beginning.